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Questions of Indigeneity and the (Re)-Emergent Ch’orti’ Maya of Honduras

By

Brent Metz

R E S U M E N

Entre el espacio de unos años, los Ch’orti’de Honduras salieron de una identidad débil y vergonzosa a tener un movimiento étnico con miles de miembros y tan fuerte que apresuró el gobierno nacional. La volatilidad de tal identidades en la época de derechos y reparaciones indígenas exige un análisis que reconozca la construcción social de identidades de grupos, pero atención única a procesos de construcción de corto plazo es impracticable y engañadora. La gente utiliza cultura existente para reconocer y fortalecer fronteras étnicas. Tal cultura y las identidades que moldea es evidencia clave en decidir si los demandantes indígenas son legítimas, o si están aprovechándose de recursos mejor destinados a otros.

In the early 1990s, the Honduran Ch’orti’s denied their indigenous heritage; within a few years, however, they had formed a fully fledged ethnic movement with thousands of members putting pressure on the government for land. The volatility of such changing identities in an era of indigenous rights and remuneration lends strong support to the social construction approach to group identity, but extreme versions of this approach are impractical and misleading. People use pre-existing culture to both recognize and reinforce ethnic boundaries. Such culture and the identities it informs are useful in deciding whether people have legitimate claims based on indigeneity, or are usurping resources meant for others in greater need.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Indigenidad: Maya Ch’orti’: Honduras: Mestizo: Movimientos Sociales

KEYWORDS: Indigeneity, ch’orti’ maya, honduras, mestizo, social movement

IN 1987 THE HONDURAN PLANNING AGENCY (SECPLAN) ORGANIZED the First Seminar-Workshop for the Ethnic Autochthonous Groups of Honduras, which included representatives from the Garífuna, Miskitu, Tolupán, Pech, Tahwaka, and Lenca

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(Anderson 2007:393–394). Officially, the Ch’orti’ Maya did not exist.¹ A decade later, a Ch’orti’ movement, with thousands of members, was at the centre of national indigenous protests against the Honduran state.² The movement has since been granted thousands of acres of land purchased by the state and are awaiting more. How could indigeneity be so volatile, and have any legal foundation?

A social construction approach (Barth 1969) would not regard ethnic volatility as enigmatic at all because ethnic groups are not transhistorical nations or “peoples,” but people with common interests who inflate or create cultural particularities to build internal cohesion and boundaries with competing groups. This approach seems vindicated in the recent history of indigenous rights movements. Before its international consolidation in the early 1990s, determining who was indigenous was not a problem because the status held few benefits (Plant 2002:214). “indians” were synonymous with archaism and torpor, and were treated at best as children and beasts of burden, and at worst as vermin. Those who clung to an indigenous lifestyle and identity did so both despite and because of discrimination. International recognition of indigenous rights in the International Labour Organization’s (ILO 1989) Convention 169, the counter-celebration of the Colombian quinentennary in 1990–1992, the 1993 UN International Year of the World’s Indigenous People, two subsequent UN Decades of Indigenous Peoples, and the overlapping of the environmental movement, did much to reverse the polarity of indigenous value. With indigenous rights arose immediate disputes over who and what is indigenous. Many groups, including ones with clear African descent, came “out of the closet” as indigenous, claiming that they had hidden their indigenous identities due to discrimination (e.g., Kuper 2003; Lazzari 2003; Hooker 2005; Forster and Chomsky 2006; Anderson 2007). In Bolivia, Evo Morales reclaimed an indigenous heritage to successfully campaign for the presidency. In fact, indigenous peoples are proliferating, not because life chances are improving, but because more are strategically reclaiming indigeneity for pragmatic reasons (see Perz, Warren, and Kennedy 2008 on the situation in Brazil), yet those most need of remuneration and attention can become lost in the crowd (Canessa 2007). Conversely, some argue that states such as Mexico and El Salvador have created more inclusive definitions of indigenous to manage potentially unruly, impoverished populations (Hale 2005, 2006b; Speed 2005; Martínez Novo 2006; Tilley 2006).

A strict social construction (i.e., deconstruction) approach, while a radical advance from the primordialist notion of transhistorical “nations” and “peoples,” can easily subvert the legitimacy of all indigenous claimants or lead to an untenable laissez-faire perspective that accepts anyone claiming to be indigenous as such (cf. Kuper 2003; Hale 2005, 2006a:105, 112; Graham 2006).³ Refusal to seriously address the issue of indigenous foundations, even while applying the term

selectively with subconscious criteria, can have repercussions not only for struggles between indigenous claimants and governing bodies, but among the claimants themselves (cf. Canessa 2007 on Bolivia). Attention to social construction should be balanced by close examination of the demographic and cultural continuities and discontinuities.

When criteria for identifying indigeneity are elaborated in academic publications and the policies of international bodies, they are remarkably similar. In fact, international bodies consult academics as well as indigenous peoples, state representatives, and others to establish concepts of indigenous. The concepts used by the UN (Cobo 1986/87), ILO (2003), World Bank (2001), EU (1998), and IDB (2006:5) share: (1) descent from colonized populations; (2) ongoing attachment to a territory considered ancestral; (3) self-identification as a distinct people; and (4) traditions distinct from those of the dominant national populations (cf. Plant 2002:214; Warren and Jackson 2002:13; Niezen 2003:19, 23; Canessa 2007). When

“traditions” are specified (Plant 2002:214; Tilley 2006), features include everything that “modern”, individualistic, capitalist consumers presumably do not have: self-subsistent and sustainable economies rooted in holistic spiritual traditions, distinct languages and dress, autochthonous political and legal systems, and communitarian ethics. Niezen (2002:23, my emphasis) puts his finger on the inherent contradiction of such expectations: “(w)hat indigenous share is some form of

subsistence economy, a territory or homeland, a spiritual system predating the arrival of missionaries, and a distinctive language. Most importantly, they share *the destruction and loss of these things*.” Indigenous peoples must claim some continuity while emphasizing the disruption of being colonized, oppressed, and cheated (Casaús Arzú 2000; Cojtí Cuxil 2000; Tilley 2006:12–13, 16–17, 50–53; Canessa 2007). This is why, as Niezen (2003:19) points out, “(i)n others’ attempts to define indigenous, the ambiguity is “the most significant feature”.” The ILO Convention 169 (ILO 2003) leaves the door open when it states that indigenous peoples are “regulated wholly or *partially* by their own customs or traditions or by special laws and regulations,” and “retain *some* or all of their social, economic, cultural and political institutions” (my emphasis). The EU’s (1998) Human Rights and Democratization Policy states that “many or all” of the above conditions are expected, while the World Bank (2001) requires “the presence, in varying degrees, of some” of these characteristics. It should come as no surprise that after 25 years of negotiations of the UN’s (2007) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIP), the myriad negotiators were unable to agree on a common definition, providing the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand a reasonable excuse to oppose it (Banks 2006).

The Honduran Ch’orti’ case highlights this contradiction but also makes clear that reasonable criteria must be established. Honduran governments, landlords,

1 and Ch'orti' claimants have indigeneity and called in anthropologists for consul-
2 tation. What will become clear via the Ch'orti' case is that a) indigeneity must be
3 analyzed in regional historical contexts, b) continuity of culture and a proud, open
4 identity should not be expected, and c) evaluation is as much about the unmarked
5 category *mestizo* as it is about *indigenous*.

7
8 **Indians, Campesinos, and Ch'orti's in Honduras**

9
10 When the Spanish invaded Honduras in 1524, Ch'orti' speakers occupied what are
11 now the western Departments of Santa Rosa de Copán and Ocotepeque (Feldman
12 2009), as well as eastern Guatemala and northwestern El Salvador.⁴ Thereafter, the
13 ethnic make-up of the region became murky, despite the existence of the clear legal
14 category of "indian." The indian town of Copán (see Fig. 1, below) ceased to exist in
15 official records in the 1600s (Fuentes and Guzmán 1699:210), a condition that
16 continued throughout the 1700s (Feldman 2009), but the peones on tobacco and
17 cattle haciendas in the valley were probably of Ch'orti' descent (Martínez 1980).
18 According to some contemporary Copán Ch'orti's, their ancestors began immi-
19 grating as independent farmers from Guatemala and the nearby Honduran town-



Figure 1 Ch'orti' map near here.

ship of Santa Rita Caxapa in the early 1800s.⁵ In 1839, Ch'orti' was spoken in Copán (Squier in García de Palacio 1985:51, n31), yet in 1860 the inhabitants were described as mestizo (Martínez in Euraque 2004:43). In 1884, archeologist Otto Stoll estimated that there were 24,000 Ch'orti' speakers in Honduras, about half of whom resided in Copán (Ardón Mejía and Sánchez 1984; Euraque 2004:43–44).⁶ From then on, Ch'orti' speakers from Guatemala continued to immigrate due to population pressure, a catastrophic drought in 1914–15 (Fought 1969:474; Metz 2006:146),⁷ and political repression from the 1930s to 1980s.⁸

A countervailing process was the abandonment of Ch'orti' identity. In the late 19th century, Honduras' governing elites began to see Indians as an anachronism and hindrance to development, such that by the 1880s “indians” disappeared from official records (Herranz 1998:53–54). Long occupied titled and untitled Indian lands were privatized, and mestizos and whites (*criollos*) began displacing or absorbing them as peones on their new estates. In San Andrés Ocotepeque in 1875, only a decade after its indian communal brotherhood (*cofradía*) had received the title for about 28 km,² the land was privatized, taxed, and eventually sold by the Indians, whose descendents claim they were duped and desperate to sell due to the tax burden and a famine. The Ocotepeque Indians also fought to have the mayor and schoolteachers remain Indians, but the state rejected this on the grounds that in Honduras ethnicity is not recognized (Herranz 1998:53–4). In the Copán area, large landowners like the notorious Guerra and Cuevas families started titling Ch'orti'-occupied lands for cattle and tobacco operations in 1921, which accelerated in 1934 after the resolution of a border dispute with Guatemala (see Loker 2005).⁹

For most of the twentieth century the national academy eliminated any reference to racial and ethnic diversity to promote de-segregation and the postcolonial myth of *mestizaje* (Euraque 2004:12, 33–34). In line with Latin American *indigenismo*, the elites deprecated the existent indigenous cultures but glorified the nation's indigenous past. In a 1926 xenophobic reaction to the influx of Caribbean black and Middle Eastern immigrants, elites renamed the national currency Lempira, after the legendary Lenca chief who valiantly resisted the Spanish invasion (Euraque 2004:66, 264). Inspired by the international infatuation with all things Maya in the 1920s and 30s, they claimed to be the political descendents of the ancient Maya, despite the fact that the Mayas occupied only the far western edge of the country and abandoned their cities over a half a millennium before the Spanish arrived (Euraque 2004:45, 50; Maca 2009). For the living indigenous peoples, however, only in 1962 did the state finally enact the Agrarian Reform Law, recognizing that they have usufruct rights to untitled lands and waterways (González 1998:69). The contradiction of valuing the unadulterated indigenous past while modernizing backwards “Indians” endured in the 1984 Law for the Protection of Cultural Patrimony, which converted the Honduran Institute

of Anthropology and History (IHAH) into an agency for both promoting *mestizaje* and recovering ancestral traditions.

Throughout most of the twentieth century the *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) of Copán and Ocotepeque were so land poor that they were forced to work for inadequate amounts of food on the haciendas. Malnutrition, digestive infections, and respiratory illnesses were rampant, and the hacienda owners demanded so much time and paid so little money that agricultural rituals were abandoned (see Schumann de Baudez 1983). The rituals also clashed with worldviews propagated by Catholic and Protestant missions and the public school system. Local elites regarded them as inferior “indians” and the army categorically treated all Guatemalan Ch’orti’ political refugees as *tacamiches*, or guerrillas, from 1960 to 90. In the 1960s,¹⁰ Honduran campesinos began to fight against the lack of land, environmental degradation, high illiteracy, lack of medical care, high infant mortality, and lack of infrastructure (Schumann de Baudez 1983; Rivas 1993:220–30), through joining the National Association of Honduran Campesinos (ANACH) and occupying hacienda lands. They were met with military and paramilitary violence and imprisonment.¹¹ After the 1970 Agrarian Reform Law was passed, their chances improved, and with the support of ANACH, the National Agrarian Institute (INA), a sympathetic mayor in Copán (Raul Huelches), and foreign NGOs, a few Copán communities¹² acquired some land after considerable sacrifice (cf. Martínez Perdomo 1997:20). This continued into the early 1990s when Copán campesinos followed the non-ethnic, class-based approach of the underground National Rural Workers Union (CNTC), but with little success.¹³

The ostensible support for indigeneity from the World Bank and the UN helped tilt Honduran politics in favor of multiculturalism in the politically repressive 1980s. Indigenous movements aided by the Catholic Church, NGOs, and anthropologists rose inversely with the decline of leftist, labor, student, and *campesino* organizations (Barahona and Rivas 1998:83–84, 96). The 1987 SECPLAN Seminar-Workshop redefined the problems of poverty and marginalization as indigenous ones. Although Ch’orti’s were not invited to the seminar, much academic attention was directed to whether Ch’orti’s could be said to exist. In 1977–79, Schumann de Baudez (1983:199–202) led a team of IHAH ethnographers to study Copán farming practices. She did not classify the destitute campesinos as indigenous because nearly all had abandoned the language and distinctive dress, although she noted that many were of Guatemalan Ch’orti’ ancestry and derogatorily called “indians.”¹⁴ In 1984, another IHAH team (Ardón Mejía and Sánchez 1984) collected oral narratives from Copán residents, some of whom they referred to as “indians,” but they wrote of Ch’orti’ customs mostly in the past tense. A reversal came in 1987 when ethnographic teams from the National Pedagogical University (UPN, later UPNFM) and the Honduran National University (UNAH) concluded

that the Copán campesinos were Ch'orti's who practiced the "totality of Ch'orti'-Maya culture" in regard to spirituality and customary law (Martínez Perdomo 1997:7). They argued strongly that what makes someone indigenous is not language but ethnic consciousness and *the will* to recover one's cultural heritage (Martínez Perdomo 1997: iii-v, 7-8, 12; Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejía 2007:25, 28, 29). Correspondingly, in 1988, the Honduran Advisory Council for the Development of Autochthonous Ethnic Groups listed 2,000 Ch'orti's in Copán and Ocotepeque (CAHDEA 1988:17, 24). Nevertheless, when anthropologist Ramón Rivas (1993:47, 212 fn 30) surveyed Honduras indigenous cultures and conditions for the World Bank 4 years later, he classified 3,500 Copán and Ocotepeque campesinos as having "Ch'orti' traditions." The obvious population in Ocotepeque was so mestizo such that he did not bother to research them in detail. I visited Copán Ruinas in 1990 but was told by campesinos that there were no Ch'orti's there, meaning no Ch'orti' speakers. Some campesinos later confessed to me that in the 1980s their ethnic consciousness was so weakened that they were condescending towards Guatemalan Ch'orti' "indian" refugees.

The seeds of ethnic revitalization began to sprout in 1988. In the Copán community of Choncó, 45 families invaded 56 hectares of hacienda land they had lost after the 1934 border settlement with Guatemala. The landowners threatened them with death and the army beat them. Ten families who held out were imprisoned in 1990, but in the ensuing court proceedings between INA and the landowners, the campesinos' claim that the land was indigenous won them 42 of the disputed hectares. Pivotal was the name of their village, *choncó*, conceivably a Ch'orti' phrase meaning "snake stream" (*chan kojn*), and the reference to the river as *chichipolote* was probably derived from Nahuatl.

Nationally, the indigenous movement began to fly the nest from its state incubators. Representatives appropriated government forums to establish the bases for an independent movement: the recovery and title of ancestral lands; support for their languages and traditional forms of organization; control over their natural resources; and representation in Congress (Anderson 2007:393-394). Thus, while the state was accepting international investments for indigenous and eco-tourism, including support for the multinational Ruta Maya (Mayan Trail) project, it found itself increasingly pressured by unruly indigenous organizations (Euraque 2004:255-7; Mortensen 2009). In the first state-backed federation of indigenous peoples, CAHDEA (Honduran Advisory Council for the Development of Autochthonous Ethnic Groups), indigenous representatives shared leadership with sympathetic mestizo officials, but in 1992 they created the independent Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras (CONPAH; Anderson 2007:394). Ironically, it was the ethnically rejuvenated Lencas, whom anthropologist Chapman (1992:13) had recently classified as "*campesinos* with Lenca

traditions,” that drove CONPAH via their subgroup COPIN (Civic Committee of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Intibucá) to protest marches on the capital Tegucigalpa (Barahona and Rivas 1998:100, 103; Anderson 2007:396). Church leaders, NGOs, and students joined the singing and praying marchers, and urbanites, including the press and even the Chamber of Commerce, warmly received the nation’s re-emergent indians (Barahona and Rivas 1998:116, 121). On May 10, 1994, President Reina, recently elected on a pro-civil society (vs. military) platform, signed the International Labor Organization’s Convention 169 on indigenous rights (González 1998:73) and established the Institute of Autochthonous and Popular Cultures within the Ministry of Culture (Euraque 2004:250).

Nevertheless, just 2 months later COPIN was back to protest against the deaths and disappearances of its members and to demand health, education, communications, and protection for land and natural resources (González 1998:74; Euraque 2004:11; Anderson 2007:396). Having thus escaped the bounds of “the permissible Indian” (Hale 2005), their authenticity was challenged by President Reina, who claimed that the true indians were vanquished in the conquest and the protestors were culturally no different than Tegucigalpa’s slum dwellers. COPIN, buoyed by popular support, persisted, and Reina made more concessions (Barahona and Rivas 1998:118–19; Euraque 2004:72). Nonetheless, the army secretly tried to create a new indigenous federation to divide the movement. On 4 April 1995, 1,500 CONPAH marchers descended again on the capital, and once again Reina refused to meet them. They responded with a hunger strike, winning them still more concessions (Barahona and Rivas 1998:124–5). By 1996, the Reina government, perhaps resigned that the problem would not go away, signed the “Declaration of Tegucigalpa,” which created the National Commission of Ethnic Groups to coordinate state and private agencies in meeting indigenous demands (González 1998:78; Euraque 2004:254).

The campesinos in the Ch’orti’region were excluded until anthropologist Lázaro Flores of UPNFM, his students, and COPIN leaders set out to organize them as indigenous Ch’orti’s in November 1994. Six Copán campesinos formed the Major Commission of the Ch’orti’Indigenous National Council of Honduras (CONICHH),¹⁵ and 2 years later Ocotepeque campesinos formed the Minor Commission to recover lands once titled to its San Andrés brotherhood. Recruitment was initially disheartening because the leaders were inexperienced, landlords threatened assassinations, and campesinos were insulted at the suggestion that they were “indians.” Some called the leaders “the antichrist” for promoting the recovery of Ch’orti’rituals. In 1995 Copán landlords and other members of the Chamber of Commerce formed a vigilante group that trailed the leaders and shot at their houses at night, while the police refused to let them meet in town. Nevertheless, the leaders’ sacrifices, support from EU-funded NGOs and the Catholic Church, and the



Figure 2 CONIMCHH meeting, near here.

charisma of local archeology tour guide, Cándido Amador, roused 15 communities to join CONIMCHH by 1996. Amador became the Ch'orti' bilingual representative in CAHDEA, where he negotiated directly with the state for Ch'orti' land rights. This exposure, along with his distinctive long hair, marked him for assassination by Copán's landlords in Copán Ruinas on April 12, 1997 (Fig. 2).

The assassination backfired. Defying police intimidation, 1,000 enraged campesinos converged on Copán Ruins for Amador's funeral, while townspeople cowered behind locked doors. They then marched on Tegucigalpa, 365 kilometers (226 miles) over mountainous terrain, and were joined by Lencas, Tawahkas, Pech, Miskito, Toliman, Garífuna, and various officials from NGOs and the Catholic Church. Three thousand marchers demanded an investigation into Amador's death¹⁶ and compliance with ILO 169. Ignored by the Reina administration, they occupied government offices for 45 days with provisions from UPNFM students. During this time, member Ovidio Pérez was assassinated in Copán, and the protesters demanded an investigation into his death as well. Army commandos finally dragged them out of the buildings, but the government signed an agreement promising 2,000 hectares to the Ocotepeque community within 2 months and 5,000 more at a later date, and 500 immediately to the Copán community and 1500 more later. First, however, it insisted on conducting an anthropological

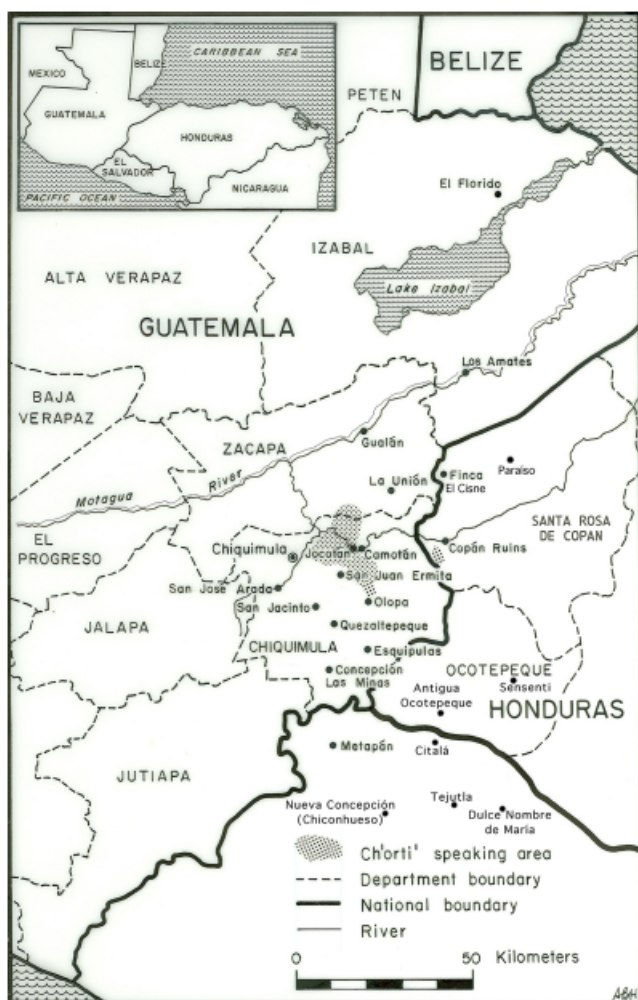


Figure 3 *Ocotepeque Organizers, near here.*

investigation into whether CONIMCHH members were authentically Honduran and Ch'orti, not Guatemalan refugees or mestizos. According to one leader,¹⁷ key to the government's reluctant acceptance of their indigenous status was that eight Ch'orti speakers were found in Copán. Fifteen more communities in Copán and five in Ocotepeque joined the movement, and the number of Ch'orti's was estimated at 4,200 (Barahona and Rivas 1998:85–6) (Fig. 3).

Government compliance in purchasing land for Ch'orti's was slow, and CONPAH, on behalf of the Ch'orti's, organized yet another March of Hunger in

1997 and occupied the Costa Rican embassy. The Ch'orti's won more concessions. They would now get 14,000 hectares, Amador's death would be investigated, the state would devise a Ch'orti' development plan, and 25 percent of the tourist income from the Copán archeological park would be diverted to CONIMCHH.¹⁸ Once again the government delayed, and in 1998 the Ch'orti's occupied the archeological park and the major highway entering Ocotepeque, where the police shot eight men, killing one, and imprisoning 93. This prompted the Ocotepeque's president to buy guns, which in turn led to his ousting and the founding of a splinter organization directly controlled by CONPAH.¹⁹ By August 2000, the government had ceded only about 10 percent of the land promised and none of the park profits, so the Ch'orti's retook the park. This time the Chamber of Commerce, the police, and the army surrounded them, launched tear gas from an army helicopter, and clubbed the fleeing Ch'orti's. Two hundred Ch'orti's of all ages were injured, 15 were admitted to hospital, and one woman aborted due to the tear gas. As Amador had earlier instructed, they filmed the attack, but the attackers confiscated their cameras and broke a reporter's leg.

INA (2001:22) records for 1998–2001 show the state spent \$2,424,562 (L36,368,435) purchasing 1,716 hectares for Ch'orti's in the Departments of Santa Rosa de Copán and Ocotepeque—a little over 1 percent of the 146,443 hectares titled for the nation's indigenous as a whole. According to INA representatives, the delay has been due to the high prices requested by local landowners, who almost overnight went from enemies to allies of the movement, as they extracted inflated prices from the state for land that had plummeted in value after the collapse of the tobacco market (Loker 2005:323). Some landlords invited Ch'orti's onto lands even before the state purchased them, but after state delays, threatened to evict them again. Exacerbating the process was the growth of CONIMCHH to 68 communities in six townships,²⁰ which demanded 20,000 hectares. By 2001, the state census listed 37,052 Ch'orti's, the fourth largest of the Honduran indigenous populations (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2001, in Anderson 2007:389), prompting the government to announce in April 2004 that no new Ch'orti' communities would be recognized. At the same time, a 2003 tourism map printed by the Honduran National Geographic Institute listed 6,000 Ch'orti' speakers in the country. By the end of 2004, the state had only transferred 30 percent of the requested land, and would have to spend another \$4.67 million (L70 million) to purchase the remaining 14,700 hectares.²¹ The struggle continues today.²²

CONIMCHH's dissatisfaction with the state's pace of transfers and fulfilment of other promises, like those on education, health care, and rural law enforcement, have sparked internal rancour. Some communities in Copán and Ocotepeque have abandoned the movement after waiting so long to receive their land, while others have attempted to leave the movement after receiving theirs (see Loker 2009 on

Copán).²³ Some wonder aloud whether the delays reflect doubts about their indigeneity. The original Ch'orti' leadership from the most culturally distinctive communities on the Copán–Guatemala border initially followed a strength-in-numbers strategy, but they have since worried that the newcomers might be undermining their indigenous legitimacy. They remind newcomers that the movement is about ethnic recovery in its totality, not simply land acquisition, and have paid Guatemalan Ch'orti's to teach children the language. Relations between Copán and Ocotepeque, the latter of which has received only about a third of the land of the former, have been especially acrimonious. The Copán Ch'orti's have monopolized the central office and been the first to receive NGO projects.²⁴ When Ocotepeque communities protest, people in Copán sometimes openly accuse them of not being racially or culturally indigenous. In 2001–04, two Ocotepeque groups splintered from CONIMCHH due to its privileging of Copán as well as intra-Ocotepeque corruption. More split from CONIMCCH in 2004 after Copán officials mortgaged the central office building and spent the loan money without procuring any receipts. In 2007, the government agreed to cede annually over \$49,000 (L900,000) of Copán archeological park's proceeds to CONIMCHH, with the caveat that it can only be spent on development projects within the township of Copán Ruinas, reflecting the view that the Mayan ruins—in some senses a key symbol of the movement—pertain only to Copán, not to all Ch'orti's as an indigenous “nation.”

Evaluating authenticity

The Honduran Ch'orti's are clearly a case of social construction and praxis. Shifting international and state policies strongly influence whether they identified themselves as indigenous or not, and with a weak Honduran state, what has counted as indigenous has largely been determined by a four-way struggle between protestors, the state, the public, and international funders. Yet, while the World Bank invests in Ch'orti' Maya tourism (see Mortensen 2009), it funds a state program to title indigenous lands for corporate resource extraction (Anderson 2007:384–385). The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), working with the now discredited (because co-opted) COMPAH, promotes the “integrated development” of indigenous peoples and Afro-Hondurans by re-examining “alleged” indigenous land titles and pushing the “exploitation and protection” of “renewable” resources like old-growth forests. They propose that the ethnic groups receive 70 percent of the taxes, not profits, on Stone Container Corporation's extractions (COPINH 2008). The point is that indigeneity gets redefined depending on the prevailing powers.

Why then define it at all? Why not go without a definition, as the negotiators of UNDRIP did, ultimately? Legal establishment of indigeneity can be constraining

for agency if done from a primordialist perspective, but it is one important tool among many for indigenous claimants. For the indigenous it is more help than hindrance to have legal foundations for their claims, because more often than not, they do not have the public and international support to sway the state with intimidation. For desperately poor and marginal people, protests are severe sacrifices in time, money, and personal security, which is why CONIMCHH only turned to them when it felt the state was not negotiating in good faith. How, though, can indigeneity be established when the concept subsumes disruptive colonization and evidence of continuity with pre-colonial populations, when in Latin America such evidence must be cultural and strictly biological because of generalized miscegenation? Those most deserving of remuneration have also been those on whom this has had the most severe impact. One must look at the particular details of each group in regional historical contexts (Watanabe and Fischer 2004:23–24), as opposed to having universal criteria or essentialist expectations.

A growing number of scholars have recently tried balancing a social construction approach with attention to social history and traditions. Essentially, their point is that the social construction of ethnic boundaries does not occur in a historical and cultural vacuum, but pre-existing traditions are used to understand and accentuate ethnic differences. For example, Cepek (2008) challenges the notion that indigenous performances for outsiders are necessarily inauthentic. The Cofans' use of environmentalist concepts like "violating the earth" and "biodiversity" have certainly been borrowed, but they are not insincere because the Cofán have long considered themselves as caretakers of the environment. Contact with foreigners, in fact, has brought this long held value to the fore as a source of positive identity construction. Similarly, Ariel de Vidas (2008:161) sees traditions not simply as products of ethnic competition, but also as motivators for boundary construction between two populations with opposing value systems. For her, Teenek identity in Mexico is the product of defense against aggressive mestizos, but also a reaffirmation of their unique, longstanding cosmological principles promoting humility, withdrawal, and dialog over confrontation. In a less direct way, Kray (2007), while discussing the dilemmas faced by Yucatec Maya women in the new economy of tourism and *maquiladoras*, identifies "Mayas" as people who distinguish themselves from mestizos and white tourists by their self-control over greed and sex. These traditional values both pre-date and have been accentuated by contact with outsiders.

Have the Honduran Ch'orti' seen themselves and been treated as a "people apart"? The Ch'orti' are distinct from the national population in some ways. The anthropologists and officials assigned to adjudicate Ch'orti' indigeneity in the 1980s and 90s used all and any distinctions, such as indigenous place names or the presence of just a few speakers, to confirm separate identity. With such standards,

Ch'orti' claimants have a lot of cultural ammunition. All practice some regional Mesoamerican traditions, such as using Ch'orti' origin words such as *ixchoko* for child²⁵ and *kume* for youngest sibling,²⁶ following the phases of the moon for its effects on plants and pregnancies, recounting stories of the *siguanaba* water monster that disguises itself as an attractive person, observing omens about the sight of snakes and butterflies, recognizing the Black Christ of Esquipulas as the patron of the region, practicing at least some subsistence corn and beans agriculture, and following region-specific recipes for herbal remedies and foods, like *ticucu* tamales and toasted corn and cocoa drinks such as *chilate* and *tiste*. All strongly identify with their local landscapes and collect wild edibles, and some places are imbued with historical and sacred meaning. In Ocotepeque, the March-ala River has been known to form a giant snake that floods towns; caves and mountain peaks, like one named "Martín Cayahuanca," provided tamales to the ancestors; and the ruins of old towns, like San Sebastian,²⁷ Azacualpa, and Antigua Ocotepeque remind people what happens when God is not respected. The Copán Ch'orti's argue that their ancestors built the ruins of Copán, from which tunnels lead to regional caves (cf. Maca 2009).

The rural communities of Copán Ruinas reproduce the most culturally distinctive traditions, which involve spiritual practices linked to corn and beans agriculture (Rivas 1993; Martínez Perdomo 1997:7–8, 26; Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejía 2007:28–32). As in the most distinctive communities in Guatemala (López García and Metz 2002; López García 2003; Metz 2006), in a few Copán communities native priests (*padrinos*) make sacrificial payments to the rain and earth (*padrineos*)²⁸ and lead prayers to bless seeds, animals, and family. The most important ceremony is the *tzikin* (Ch. *tzik'in*), when ancestors return to partake of the spiritual essence of a feast prepared by their descendents. In the community of Tapasco, a Guatemalan Ch'orti' "Mesiah", Guillermo García, founded a cult replete with its own temple, guards porting magical wooden guns, rigid rejection of official politics and organized religion, and Mesoamerican cosmology regarding the four pillars of the universe, including prophesies of Armageddon for all who stray from traditional subsistence lifestyles.²⁹ Some Hondurans regard such customs as exotic or *bien raro*, and development workers express frustration at their subsistence mentality. Also unlike the general Honduran population, some Copán Ch'orti's prefer their own hand-made crafts or those made by Guatemalan Ch'orti's, such as pottery, grass mats, rope, hammocks, fiber bags, and palm brooms, over industrially produced plastic ones that are sometimes cheaper. All follow the tradition of paying laborers with meals as well as money, including meat at planting (from the sacrifice of fowl). Nevertheless, in regard to values, far from rejecting materialism, all demand modern education, health care, and infrastructural development from the state.

To the north and east of Copán Ruinas are communities whose loss of land has severely restricted, and in many cases led to the elimination of, subsistence agriculture, craft production, and spiritual traditions. Most work as low wage laborers on coffee and cattle plantations (cf. Rivas 1993:327), but desire to regain the subsistence lifestyle minus the spirituality. As one man in Porvenir II, Copán, explained, “in these modern times we believe in nothing, but before the people were very intelligent. They had plenty of beans and corn because they had faith, but now that faith has ended. We’ve tried to recover it, but we just couldn’t.” Another, from Agua Caliente, Copán, echoed this: “the people before knew how to live, because whatever they divined was true. And one sees in books that they were right. They were guided by stars, trees, and their own intelligence. But here all was lost ... because we moved ahead by education. After all, the old-timers were ignorant and isolated.” Many maintain the subsistence value of having as many children as God grants, which is a motivating factor for the movement’s struggle for land (Martínez Perdomo 1997:78, 84, 90; cf. Metz 2001a, 2006), and a rare few with enough resources in Santa Rita practice the *tzikin*. Poorer households follow the Mesoamerican tradition of making a stove by resting a ceramic griddle (*comal*) on three stones. As for identity, most regard themselves first and foremost as poor campesinos who have been cheated out of their land; participation in national development, and the idea of being indigenous, has only been embraced by a fraction of them. Both Copán Ch’orti’s and non-indigenous locals, in fact, question their indigeneity. Some with European phenotypes may never have had ancestors with indigenous identities and traditions, but many others have clear indigenous features.

The Ocotepeque claimants are obviously different from the other Ch’orti’ claimants as well as Guatemalan Ch’orti’s. No one remembers when Ch’orti’ was spoken there, and the men regard carrying loads in the traditional Mesoamerican headstrap (*mecapal*) style (*akukuch*) to be “Indian” and embarrassing. Many members do not have land to practice subsistence agriculture, and some would not know how to do so if they did have the space. Those who farm tend to do so for the market. The annual round of agricultural rituals and craft-making practiced in Guatemala and the Copán core are unknown,³⁰ although they use the word *tzikin* to refer to the candied squash given to children on All Saints Day and the Spanish word *caseano* for the celebration of the dead, which they do not practice. On the other hand, they maintain unique traditions seemingly based on Old World practices, most of which pertain to the San Andres and San Sebastian brotherhoods. Every October and November, the San Andrés brotherhood, tenaciously remaining in the old municipal seat (Antigua) destroyed by a 1934 landslide, weaves together the surrounding communities with its ritual “Migration”, in which the saint’s image is passed from community to community, house-to-house, and

honored with prayers and feasting. The journey ends with “The Entrance” to Antigua on November 17 and involves fireworks, performances by masked Old-timers, “indians,” Scarecrows (*corasquines*), the *ujiganga* image (of probable Lenca linguistic origin), and the Dance of the Moors and Christians. Traditionally, The Entrance is a time of drunken revelry, but the Catholic Church has been trying to ban such “pagan” practices. The festivities end with the *parales* in the rural community of Azacualpa—once the colonial municipal seat—where fruit is hung in deference to the fertility-bearing San Andrés.³¹ While in many respects the Ocatepeque Ch’orti’s are culturally indistinguishable from the national campesino population, locally they regard themselves as a people apart in their devotion to their brotherhoods and to the recovery of their privatized land.

Discussion

The Honduran Ch’orti’ case raises many questions. Should people who speak no indigenous languages and wear no distinctive dress be considered indigenous? If so, how much distinctive culture and how strong an ethnic consciousness must they have? What if people practice distinctive traditions, but those traditions have few or no indigenous roots? Should people who essentially attempted to pass as mestizos and even ridiculed “indians” be recognized as indigenous when ethnically repressive conditions are replaced with more benign ones (Martínez Perdomo 1997:22; Lazzari 2003; Rappaport 2005)? Is it possible for an indigenous people to have a shameful identity instead of a proud, righteous one? Do people cease being indigenous when they become corrupt and materialistic? It is convenient for academics to purport that they are not the judges of such issues, only observers and analysts of how these issues are played out on the ground, but the mere application of terms like *indigenous*, *Maya*, *mestizo*, and *campesino* to some people and not others is an inherently evaluative and political act. Thus, these questions cannot be dodged.

Keeping in mind the need to recognize that indigenous peoples have some verifiable historical linkage, such as descent or distinctive traditions, from colonized populations that suffered deleterious cultural and biological disruptions, some of the questions above become manageable. Colonized people should not be expected to maintain their language and distinctive dress if they expose them to discrimination. Similarly, regarding the degree of cultural difference necessary for indigenous status, it is not the quantity, extent, or depth of the cultural differences that matter, but whether those cultural differences are used to reinforce an identity as a separate people. We cannot expect indigenous people to continue (or to have ever practiced, for that matter) sustainable, self-subsistent economies or preserve a consensus-based political and legal system. It may seem disingenuous when self-proclaimed Ch’orti’s no longer believe in animate environs, prefer biomedicines

over herbal ones, and want maquiladora jobs, but not when they have lost their land, been attacked for their spiritual practices, taught only in Spanish, and employed at starvation wages. The existence of such traditions can clearly mark indigeneity, but non-indigenous roots of distinctive cultural practices should not disqualify people from indigeneity status. What matters is that they practice some culture exclusive to themselves that helps define and bolster their identity, and that they have some evidence linking them to colonized populations.

The Copán Ch'orti's continue to suffer racial and cultural discrimination, and those to the north and in Ocotepeque suffer mostly from the effects of discrimination against their ancestors. The Ch'orti claimants to the north and east of Copán are more ambiguous, however. Their principal identity has been as landless campesinos, and they, like most CONIMCHH members, regard membership alone as an affirmation of indigenous status. When asked whether a community or individual is Ch'orti, they bluntly respond, "yes, they are members", or "no, they're not members." The government, moreover, cedes land not to communities or households, but directly to CONIMCHH for redistribution, and this despite the fact that "Indians" in the region (Fry 1988:174) have long preferred to manage their land individually, not communally (Jackson 2002:102–3; Montejo 2002:126–7; Horton 2006; Loker 2009). While the privileging of a political organization over a comprehensive indigenous group would seem damning, membership in and of itself implies significant sacrifices of time, money, and potentially life and limb, so that all members can recover land and repressed Ch'orti traditions, and build a stronger sense of solidarity. Maya leader Montejo (2002:129) eloquently expresses the sense of emphasizing a strong identity over returning to a primordial culture: "(T)he agenda of Mayan scholars and activists is not to embellish ourselves with a romantic past or to wrap ourselves in ancient Maya garb but to revitalize our Mayan identity and weave back in the sections worn away by centuries of neglect. Contemporary Maya are constantly creating and recreating their Maya culture and redefining themselves."

This raises the issues of shameful identities and returning to indigenous identities after having rejected them. Neither should disqualify people who by definition have suffered predatory discrimination, which would be tantamount to blaming the victim precisely when some redress was finally available. This is where the issue of mestizos comes to the fore. For centuries indians have passed as mestizos for self-preservation or upward mobility, and now some mestizos or unmarked campesinos are embracing their indigenous sides (e.g., López García 1998; Grey Postero and Zamosc 2004:12, 14; Hoffman French 2004; Canessa 2006; Gabbert 2006:89, 91), just as some scholars have long urged them to do (e.g., Guzmán-Bockler 1975). Mestizos by definition have mixed indigenous and European heritage, and can suffer racial discrimination from whites. Gasco (2006),

for example, found in Soconusco, Mexico, that, as in Ocotepaque, the colonial emergence of a ladino/mestizo identity coincided with indigenous loss of land and inability to pay tribute, but today they share the same poverty and many traditions with the indigenous, such as knowing the Nahuatl names and uses of over 200 medicinal plants (cf. Kufer et al. on ladinos in the Guatemalan Ch'orti' area). While mestizos becoming indigenous may result in a welcome boost in indigenous numbers and power, it can also erode indigenous legitimacy and divert attention from the people who need it most (Canessa 2006). If such mestizos can demonstrate the deleterious consequences of racial discrimination and maintenance of a distinct identity, then they should be remunerated for past wrongs and protected from future ones. As some anthropologists and the Colombian state have recognized, there are many degrees of indigeneity, each with their own particular needs and degrees of urgency (Friedman 1994:97–100; Maybury-Lewis 1997:x, 8; Plant 2002:212).

The last question addressed here regards whether groups that are corrupt, materialistic, and environmentally unsustainable should be considered indigenous. Lauer (2006) presents such a case in Venezuela's Biosphere Reserve. There, most indigenous Yanomamo and Ye'kwana have sided with environmental and religious NGOs to protect their land from developers, but one Ye'kwana political leader has used his government position to accumulate wealth by allying with extractive industries. This latter group argues that they refuse to be kept in a forested museum and deserve the same amenities as others, suggesting that the anti-development faction is beholden to foreign NGOs and thus not indigenous. The Honduran Ch'orti's have found themselves in similar predicaments. Some leaders have used organization funds in corrupt and unauthorized ways, and some communities are only interested in land and not in Ch'orti' indigenous values of communalism, recovery of local forests, and language revitalization. These values, however, have largely been promoted by anthropologists, NGOs, and leaders from other indigenous groups. Nevertheless, like the Cofán (Cepek 2008), the Ch'orti's have long practiced communalism in the form of reciprocity and consensus decision-making, and have shared a concern for wild resources that they use for subsistence living. In this sense, in disputes between "the corrupt materialists" and "the communitarian environmentalists," one should err towards the latter as the best indigenous representatives, depending on the historical context of each group.

There are no hard and fast criteria for defining indigeneity. Each case should be examined in its own context. Because indigeneity connotes both colonialism and some continuity of social construction, analysts should attend to cultural differences meaningful to identity maintenance rather than specific types of culture or continuities of tradition. Given that indigeneity implies dispossession and disruption, when in doubt, scholars and officials should err on side of the indigenous

claimants; however, to accept all indigenous claimants is a recipe for infighting and skepticism towards all claimants by outsiders.

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Notes

¹In Honduras, it is conventional to use the Spanish spelling, *chortí*, whereas the Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages spells the language capitalized as *Ch'orti'* and the people as *ch'orti'*. Some Honduran activists have begun to adopt the Guatemalan spellings.

²I have conducted over 2 years of ethnographic research among Guatemalan Ch'orti's since 1990 (Metz 2006), and about 5 months of research among Honduran Ch'orti's since 1997.

³For example, in recent Guatemalan censuses the National Institute of Statistics government, in an attempt to be more democratic, has let people self-identity their ethnic affiliation, rather than be categorized by census workers. This had led to battles between Mayan demographers (Tzian 1994) and anthropologists (Adams 1998) over whether citizens are being sincere in their auto-identification, with the Mayas arguing that many Mayas conceal their indigeneity due to intimidation.

⁴The Ch'orti' polities of Zacapa, Esquipulas, Chiquimula in Guatemala, and Copán and Sensenti in Honduras, and the Ch'orti' and Pipil towns of Mitlán in Guatemala and Guijar, Ostúa, Tejutla, Teculocelo, Chicunhueso, Atempa-Masagua, Metapán, Angue, and Sitalá in El Salvador united unsuccessfully to repel the Spanish (Brewer 2002:46, 54–55; Fuentes and Guzmán 1933:169–82, 204–9; García de Palacio 1985:11–13, n3; 51–52; Girard 1977; Larde and Larín 1955:19, 2000:152–55; Terga 1980:29–36).

⁵Luis Vásquez dates the founding of Boca del Monte, Copán, to 1812, and María de Jesús Interiano and Manuel Mancilla recount that Carrizalón, Copán, was settled in 1820.

⁶This probably refers to the entire Department of Santa Rosa de Copán because in 1890 the Honduran census recorded only 500 inhabitants in the township of Copán.

⁷In the early 1900s, sending communities included Camotán, Jocotán, San Jacinto, Esquipulas, Ipala, and Quezaltepeque, and the Honduran receiving communities included Chonco, Carrizalón, Tapesco, and Corralito (cf. Schumann de Baudéz 1983:203–6).

⁸In 1954, refugees settled in Rincón del Buey, Corralito, and Hacienda Grande. In the 1960s–80s, Guatemalan Ch'orti's spread throughout western Honduras and formed the first refugee camp of the Guatemalan civil war in La Laguna, Paraíso.

⁹Guerra titled the lands of Carrizalón, Tapesco, and Chonco, among others, near the Guatemalan border. In the neighbouring township of Santa Rita, campesinos recount that “engineer” Emilio Hueso bought title for much of the valley for as little as “25 pesos,” thanks to the influence of his father, who was in the government.

¹⁰According to informants María de Jesús Interiano (July 3, 1997; October 27, 2004), Don Andrés Pérez (July 22, 2003), Don Rufino (July 24, 2003), Don Beto López Mancilla (July 23, 2003), Manuel

Mancilla (October 27, 2004), and Máximo Vásquez and Estanislao Cruz (October 26, 2004), and about 20 adults from Rincón del Buey (October 26, 2004). Lic. Mario Coto also filled in details.

¹¹About 60 campesinos from San Antonio Tapesco were the first squatters on land in 1967. After being expelled, they tried again in 1974, but the landowner and his henchmen attacked and murdered three of them.

¹²Choncó, Carrizalón, Ostumán, San Antonio Tapesco, and Rincón del Buey.

¹³In 1989, 18 campesinos of La Laguna, inspired by a Liberation Theology priest, joined the CNTC and clandestinely organized on Cerro Chino mountain. On their third attempt to squat on the infamous Cuevas' land, they were attacked by the landowner and two henchmen on October 21, 1991, with three campesinos seriously injured and one eventually dying in prison. Five were imprisoned for 14–20 months for the death of an injured henchman, who in fact survived, while some of their children died from malnutrition. INA and some congressional deputies supported negotiation, but the police, the army, and the Chamber of Commerce supported the landowners and used death threats to try to get the prisoners to renounce their land claims. The CNTC used this aggression to recruit 200 outraged squatter families, forcing the landowner to negotiate. The campesinos won only 14 hectares of pasture for the new community of Estanzuela, and two months later the CNTC lawyer and negotiator, Jesús Guerra, was assassinated.

¹⁴She described deplorable living conditions, with the average family of six and their gaunt animals unable to produce the eight pounds of corn necessary for daily survival, which, not coincidentally, compelled them to work for the landlords at starvation level wages.

¹⁵One Lenca was Valentín Campos. The five Copán participants were from the aldeas of Choncó (2), Tapesco (1), and Carrizalón (2). Estanzuela and Rincón del Buey, considered to practice the most distinctive Ch'orti' culture. In 1999, "Maya" was added to the name, making it CONIMCHH (Euraque 2004:65).

¹⁶Two assassins were eventually convicted in 2001.

¹⁷Rufino Pérez.

¹⁸The idea of extracting a percentage of earnings from the park's tourism profits UNCLEAR, please rephrase was originally conceived by the municipal government of Copán Ruins in the early 1990s, and it also won a promise of 25 percent.

¹⁹CONPAH soon thereafter disintegrated due to corruption and its leaders' disconnection from their rural constituencies (Barahona and Rivas 1998:98–99).

²⁰Copán Ruinas, Santa Rita, Cabañas, Paraíso, Ocotepeque, and Sinuapa.

²¹According to INA representative, Carola Pineda.

²²For example, another 980 hectares were given to the Ch'orti's from 2004 to mid-2007.

²³Cipresal, Ocotepeque. For Copán, see Loker (2009).

²⁴Oxfam, the Dutch and Irish development agencies, and the Communitarian Christian Organization for Integrated Development (OCDI), which have given potable water, schools, laminated metal for roofs, and cattle.

²⁵From Ch'orti' *ijch'ok*, "girl".

²⁶From Ch'orti' *ku'm* or *ku'mix*. In Ocotepeque, the word used is *azur*, the linguistic origin of which is unknown. The youngest child is important traditionally because he or she inherits the parents' home and remaining land in exchange for caring for them. In oral narratives, the hero is typically the youngest sibling.

²⁷Legend has it that the original town seat was San Sebastian, but after people chased out an unpopular priest, he put a hex on them by burying a golden image of Christ upside down in the church, after which all began to die of plague. The inhabitants may have been the same 207 indians documented by Cortés and Larraz in the 1760s about one kilometre away in Citalá (Montes 1977:183–85).

²⁸Informants say that *padrinos* used to come from Shalaguá and Muyurcó, Camotán, Guatemala, to call the rains, but Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejía (2007:27, fn 7) and Martínez Perdomo (1997:26, 49–50) say the ceremonies are still performed locally.

²⁹Honduran anthropologist Lázaro Flores Mejía is a “saint” in the cult (Martínez Perdomo 1997:38–47; Mena Cabezas and Flores Mejía 2007).

³⁰Except in the highland township of Dolores Merendón.

³¹San Sebastián complements San Andrés by bringing the rains.

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